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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001193

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM IR FR

SUBJECT: FRANCE-IRAN: MAGAZINE ARTICLE RE-IGNITES POLITICAL ROW

REF: A. PARIS 1162

¶B. PARIS POINTS AUG 27 2009

Classified By: Classified by Pol M/C Allegrone for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary. A series of Iranian and French actions in Paris seem to have decreased the likelihood that accused French citizen Clotilde Reiss will be acquitted in the immediate future. After Iranian authorities conditionally released Reiss from prison on August 16, it appeared that she could soon be pardoned. Then, in an August 25 interview with Le Parisen newspaper, Iranian Ambassador to France, Seyed Mehdi Miraboutalebi, leveled what appear to be new and far more detailed charges of espionage against Reiss and France than those announced August 10 in Tehran by the Iranian prosecutor. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner angrily retorted in Le Monde newspaper that Iran's' charges were "nonsense." This exchange prompted President Sarkozy to change plans and publicly address the Reiss situation in his August 26 remarks to the French Conference of Ambassadors. According to Presidential Strategic Affairs Advisor Francois Richier, Iranian Ambassador Miraboutalebi took offense to what he considered an intentional slight because the interview referred to him by the name of his predecessor. This series of steps appears to have damaged the progress that was being made to secure Clotilde Reisse's release. End summary.

¶2. (U) Iran originally detained Reiss on July 1 for allegedly participating in anti-government demonstrations in Tehran following the country's elections in June. Her August 16 release to house arrest at the French Embassy while awaiting a court verdict appeared to suggest progress was being made on an eventual resolution to her case. However, Miraboutalebi leveled what appear to be fresh accusations in the Le Parisen article published on August 25, claiming that Reiss had taken specific actions that led Iran to accuse her of espionage. He claimed Reiss had training in nuclear technology and had written a paper entitled, "Understanding Iranian politics in the nuclear crisis" prior to coming to the country. He questioned why she had decided to come to the Iranian university located in the same city as Iran's uranium enrichment program, why someone educated in geopolitics would pose as a French language instructor, and why a teacher of foreign language would come to a school of technology to teach a subject not offered by the school. Miraboutalebi added that Iranian officials had followed Reiss since her arrival in Iran and that she had admitted to each of the eight charges against her. Responding to the question that her confessions could have been made under duress, he told Le Parisen that Islam prevented Iranian officials from doing so. Miraboutalebi added that when the French Ambassador visited Reiss in prison, he found her in good condition.

¶3. (U) Le Monde carried Kouchner's response to the new charges later the same day. The Foreign Minister was clearly upset and called the Iranian accusations "nonsense." He

added Iranian justice officials had not accused Reiss of spying and Miraboutalebi was wrong to do so. Kouchner added that the Government of France (GOF) had tried to work with the Iranian government and that he had called his interlocutor on a weekly basis, but without having secured Reiss's return to the France.

¶4. (C) Presidential Strategic Affairs advisor Richier told us that Sarkozy had originally planned not to raise the Reiss issue in his August 26 speech to France's corps of Ambassadors (Ref B) in part due to progress on the Reiss case including her August 16 release to house arrest. However, the August 25 Le Parisen article, which the French believe was issued under instructions from Tehran, prompted Sarkozy to change his mind by publicly addressing the Reiss issue which he called a "hostage scandal" and noted that two French citizens were involved in order to draw attention to a French-Iranian dual national, Nazak Afshar, who was also arrested at the same time as Reiss and is of equal concern to the French government. Moreover, Sarkozy publicly took a tough line on Iran's leaders when he said "the same leaders who are telling us that the Iranian nuclear program is peaceful are telling us their elections were honest. Frankly, who believes them."

¶5. (C) To complicate matters, Le Parisen used the name of Iran's former Ambassador instead of Miraboutalebi's. According to President Sarkozy's Strategic Affairs Advisor Francois Richier, Miraboutalebi considered this reference an intentional slight orchestrated by the French government to humiliate him. Richier joked that as a result France is seemingly almost at war with Iran.

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¶6. (C) Comment: While Sarkozy made an important point to highlight the less well known case of French-Iranian detainee Nazak Afshar, we judge that any potential French hostage release likely will be delayed due to this exchange. Sarkozy's intensified public critique of the Iranian leadership hopefully will demonstrate to the Iranian government that the GOF will not shy away from confrontation regarding Iran's nuclear program even in the face of "scandalous" treatment of French nationals.

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